

## Spring 2008, Chicago

It was a mid-April evening, the sweet smells of springtime upon us and the last light reluctantly giving way outside the front window, when my graduate seminar ended and everyone pitched in to clean up. A dozen of my students were spread out in our living room, cups and dishes scattered everywhere, small piles of books and papers marking specific territory. Until a moment before, all of us had focused intensely on the work at hand: thesis development, the art of the personal essay, and the formal demands of oral history research. As a professor for two decades, my favorite teaching moments often popped up during these customary potluck seminars at our home—something about sharing food in a more intimate personal setting, perhaps, or disrupting the assumed hierarchy of teacher authority, or simply being freed from the windowless, fluorescent-lit concrete bunkers that passed for classrooms at my university. But the seminar was done for this evening, and as students began to gather their things, a self-described “political junkie” clicked on the TV and flipped to the presidential primary debate, well under way by now, between Hillary Clinton and the young upstart from Chicago, Barack Obama.

ABC was broadcasting the debate to a record-setting audience, and the debate moderators Charles Gibson and George Stephanopoulos seemed to be doing their best to make a mess of things, avoiding anything of substance in favor of a kind of weird political cage fighting—bloody performance art—throwing up little bits of trivia and gossip and “gotchas,” inviting snarls and cuts without any serious illumination or thoughtful reflection. I wandered in and out from the kitchen, muttering that no one watching would be the wiser for the time spent, but my students didn’t pay me any mind. The only explicit response I got was from one of the youngest, who glanced at me impatiently as she emphatically shushed me. Everyone, it seemed, was captured by the theater riot beaming from the screen, political junkies all, fascinated by what was being framed by the big brains of punditry as a “historic contest.” I stood near the back of the room.

Stephanopoulos, a former aide to President Bill Clinton, turned to Senator Obama and said, “On this . . . general theme of patriotism in your relationships . . .” The *general theme* in question was becoming central to the dramatic narrative spun by everyone now running against Obama, and Stephanopoulos was about to press him about his former pastor, the Reverend Jeremiah Wright, whose most impassioned statements about racism, war, and the American government (“God damn America!”) had been widely disseminated and discussed.

“But do you believe he’s as patriotic as you are?” he asked.

Obama replied, “This is somebody who’s a former Marine. So I believe that he loves this country. But I also believe that he’s somebody who, because of the

experiences he's had over the course of a lifetime, is also angry about the injustices he's had."

Now Stephanopoulos was bearing down on the "general theme of patriotism in your relationships." "A gentleman named William Ayers," Stephanopoulos began. "He was part of the Weather Underground in the 1970s. They bombed the Pentagon, the Capitol, and other buildings. He's never apologized for that. . . . An early organizing meeting for your state senate campaign was held at his house, and your campaign has said you are '*friendly*.' Can you explain that relationship for the voters and explain to Democrats why it won't be a problem?"

I thought Obama looked slightly stricken, temporarily off-balance, and uncharacteristically tongue-tied. I was probably projecting, because I felt suddenly dizzy, off-balance, and tongue-tied myself. But I know for sure my students were thunderstruck. Their heads snapped in my direction and a few literally dropped to the floor, one with both hands over her mouth. Obama replied: "This is a guy who lives in my neighborhood, who's a professor of English in Chicago, who I know and who I have not received some official endorsement from. . . . The notion that somehow as a consequence of me knowing somebody who engaged in detestable acts forty years ago, when I was eight years old, somehow reflects on me and my values doesn't make much sense, George."

He had us at "he's a guy who lives in my neighborhood."

An explosion of laughter ricocheted around the room. Some were genuinely amused, some disbelieving and a bit horrified; everyone clamored to make sense of the bombshell that had just dropped into our little seminar, and by extension, reverberated around the country and the world. I sat down, and the student who had shushed me a moment ago turned to me and said, "Oh my God, that guy has the same name as yours." Another explained to her excitedly that that's because we were indeed the *same guy*: "Bill's the guy, and we're in the neighborhood George is talking about!"

No one in our living room really heard Hillary Clinton raise the stakes. She was concerned about Obama's association with someone who, she pointed out, said in an interview published in the *New York Times* on September 11, 2001, that he didn't regret bombing government buildings even though, Clinton claimed, "in some instances people died," and "he was just sorry they hadn't done more," and that the relationship continued after 9/11. No one heard Obama match her poke for poke: Your husband, he charged, "pardoned or commuted the sentences of two members of the Weather Underground, which I think is a slightly more significant act than me serving on a board with somebody." Neither candidate really knew what they were talking about, and each seemed simply to be following fact-free scripts written by pollsters or aides assigned the dirt detail. Clearly, both camps had done some shabby opposition research, and each was busy, busy, busy spinning its particular phony narrative. Each candidate threw a

few more chips on the fire before moving on, and no one listening or watching learned anything substantive from the exchange.

My students were amazed to see me cast on TV as some kind of public enemy, and even though I knew the connection was a story that had been percolating in the fever swamps of the right-wing blogs for months, I was amazed too. My partner, Bernardine Dohrn, and I had hosted the initial fund-raiser for Obama and uncharacteristically donated a little money to his campaign for the Illinois senate; we lived a few blocks apart, and he and I had sat on a couple of nonprofit boards together. So? Who could have predicted it would blow up like this?

"A guy around the neighborhood"—as funny as it sounded, I thought he got it exactly right.

Before Obama became a US senator and then a presidential candidate, Bernardine and I thought of *him* as a guy around the neighborhood, too. Even though lots of people have said to me something like, "Oooo-oooh!!!" remembering that he'd called me "a guy around the neighborhood," I didn't take it that way at all. After all we knew him then not as the huge, all-caps, super-accomplished, unbelievably successful, transcendent person he would become but as someone you might run into at the bookstore or the market. A guy . . . around the neighborhood.

Bernardine knew Michelle Obama as a smart, dignified, and community-minded advocate from the time they overlapped at a Chicago law firm, and when we later met Barack, she thought he was almost, if not quite, Michelle's match. He too was brilliant, "the smartest guy in any room he walks into," I said repeatedly, and later added, "Including the US Senate." And not only hugely intelligent but also kind and sturdy and compassionate—a great combination. No one could miss another quality either: political ambition. For years I said to Bernardine— in a real display of the low horizon of my own imagination— "Barack's obviously going places. . . . I think he wants to be the mayor of Chicago someday."

He and I served together on the board of the Woods Fund, a small Chicago foundation that supported community organizing in the belief that ordinary people have the keys to making a more just and joyful world for all. The people with the problems are also the people with the solutions, we said. Community organizing was the foundation of the Black Freedom Movement, the women's movement, and the labor and immigrant rights movements, the fight for safe workplaces and the forty-hour workweek, and much more. Barack came to the foundation because of his experience as a community organizer and as a lawyer at a civil rights firm. I came as an education professor and school reform activist, as well as someone who wrote about urban problems and city kids.

In our modest boardroom Barack was steady and cool, always a quick study and always a serious practitioner of conversation in search of common ground. Several of the grants we gave out were adventurous and unpredictable, and most of us felt that was exactly our job: to set a learning agenda and to provide teachable moments, times of disequilibrium where new and innovative solutions to old problems might emerge. That meant not all of our grants were successful in any conventional sense, and that board meetings were lively and sometimes contentious, even raucous.

At one meeting, the board split on a small arts grant to a theater group that performed plays challenging bias against gay and lesbian students, largely in schools. The young program officer who presented the grant was interrogated sharply by a senior board member, who said that it offended his personal moral views and his religious convictions. The younger man fought back quietly but bravely, defending it as a question of social justice and community ethics, and simply as the right thing to do. The grant passed, barely.

When we took a break, Barack pointedly told the program officer that he admired him for his steadfastness in a difficult situation. Then he stepped outside with the dissenting board member and told him he understood how hard it must be to see the value of this proposal through his own perspective, but that over time we would all be glad we had stood up against discrimination and for equal rights. Pure Barack.

When Bernardine and I were asked by our state senator, the redoubtable Alice Palmer, to host a coffee for Barack Obama as he launched his first campaign for public office, we said yes. Our home was always open for a rendezvous or two and for all kinds of gatherings, meetings, book talks, seminars, campaigns, salons, fund-raisers, discussion groups, get-togethers, play-readings, and round tables. It was a pretty routine Sunday afternoon: a few dozen folks—colleagues from the university, lawyers, Hyde Park neighbors—with coffee and cake and cookies. When Bernardine stopped the informal conversation, welcomed people to our home, and introduced Alice and Barack, the afternoon took on an unmistakable passing-of-the-torch vibe. Alice was stepping down from the Illinois senate to run for Congress, she wanted to see her seat go to someone who would continue in a progressive direction, and she thought Barack was the one.

Barack praised Alice for her work in and out of government, then spoke about the need to develop a bottom-up, top-down strategy for moving any progressive agenda forward. "Without organized power from the grassroots, nothing will advance; without political leaders who will respond wherever possible, those good efforts are stifled," he said. A South Side minister said a kind word about Barack's work, a couple of other politicians from Alice's generation agreed, and then Bernardine gave a modest pitch for donations—we raised a few hundred bucks. Obama won Alice's seat in the Illinois state senate, and the rest is history.

Of course, years later, on the night of the Stephanopoulos surprise, none of my students knew any of this, and no one in our living room could have seen this coming. By the time everyone settled down, the debate was done. My students stuck around for quite a while, a bit dazed, I think. Someone pointed out helpfully that I wasn't a professor of English, and someone else wondered aloud how this line of attack might impact Senator Obama's chances. Most were super considerate, asking what I needed and attending to me as if I'd been hit by a truck—which was a bit how I felt. How are you? Can I get you some tea? And then: how well did you know him? Are you thrilled to be associated like this? Are you scared? I think for some of them there was an abrupt awareness that, while they'd known me quite well a few minutes before, they had suddenly ceased to know me at all. That made sense to me, because for a moment I wondered who I was as well. When they finally trickled out, some still shaking their heads in marvelous disbelief, others smiling in wonder, each offered a hug or a handshake. It was a bizarre end-of-seminar moment, but quite tender.

The evening became even more surreal: no sleep, of course, and lots of phone calls from family and friends, lots of disbelief and laughter and support, as well as some sense of foreboding and apprehension. Bernardine and I held each other a little closer, trying to regain our balance and come to terms with the sudden sense that this cartoon character, *Bill Ayers*, who looked exactly like me and shared my name, address, and Social Security number, was about to become a punching bag in a presidential campaign, a character who might actually have an impact on the outcome of a national election. It felt altogether too big and, all in all, too strange.

Fantastic, unreal, crazy—*Bill Ayers* had been quiet and still, fermenting on a dusty shelf in an unused laboratory for decades, when he was abruptly plucked from a jar of brine. Suddenly, there he was, a little wrinkled, dripping and smelling of vinegar and garlic, but alive! And the Weather Underground, suspended in amber all these years, was reborn out of the blue, not only active and breathing fire but all of a sudden more menacing and dangerous—and far, far better known—than it had ever been before. Mouth-to-mouth resuscitation had been administered by the fringe, but its resurrection now lay in the hands of an opportunistic media and eager campaign staffs of the Right, the middle, and even the moderate Left.

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